

# Iyer Wedding Rituals

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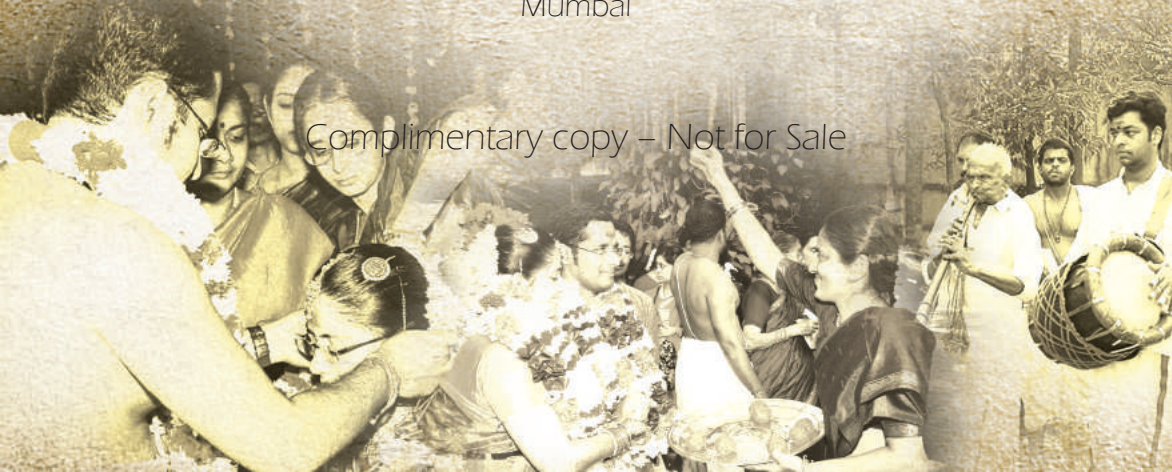


# Kerala Iyer Wedding a Primer

To Commemorate the wedding of  
Sowbhagyavathi Shruti Ganapathy  
With  
Chiranjeevi Santosh Hariharan

On Sunday, the 17<sup>th</sup> of January 2010  
At Ahobila Mutt Hall, Chembur  
Mumbai

Complimentary copy – Not for Sale



## FOREWORD



Every parent wants to see their child get married and settle down in life at the right age. And where the marriage takes place with the involvement of the parents, they take

great pride in conducting the auspicious ceremony in a befitting manner. They also yearn to make the occasion a memorable one not only for the couple and the relatives but also for all the guests invited to the wedding.

Like many a parent before me, I also felt that I could achieve the above purpose by publishing a booklet explaining some of the important features and rituals relating to Hindu marriages in general and Tamil/Iyer marriages in particular, to commemorate the auspicious occasion of the marriage of my daughter Shruti with Santosh. Not having had the luxury of time to research into the subject, I have wholly relied on the work done by earlier writers and scholars – a lot of which was available on various websites on the internet. I have added a few photographs to illustrate some of the rituals. The source of the rituals viz. Vedic, Puranic or Social has also been indicated.

This booklet is a gift from my family to all the guests attending the marriage function. I earnestly hope that the readers will benefit from the contents and preserve this booklet for it to be passed on to the next generation. I consider it very important for our youngsters to understand and appreciate the

philosophy and the purport underlying a Hindu marriage in order to preserve our cultural and religious heritage. I hope that this booklet will serve as a small step in that direction.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the following writers and contributors to the websites from where I have sourced most of the content:

“Iyer Vivaha” by Mr. G.H. Ananthanarayanan, [www.ibiblio.org](http://www.ibiblio.org), [Indianetzone](http://Indianetzone.com), [www.keralayaiyers.com](http://www.keralayaiyers.com), <http://shyamalanandini.blogspot.com>, <http://far2.static.flickr.com>, [www.vadhyar.com](http://www.vadhyar.com)

I must also thank Mrs. Nalini and Mr. Vaidyanathan of Kuwait for permitting me to use a few photographs from the album of their son Nandan’s wedding with Divya, to embellish this booklet. Thanks are also due to Mr. Chelladurai of Kuwait for his immense help in getting this booklet printed. And of course I owe my gratitude to Mr Keshara for designing and Mr. Philip James and his team of Bougamaz Printing Press, Kuwait for printing this booklet within a very short time given to them..

And last but not the least I owe a big thanks to my daughter Shruti for her journalistic and creative contribution and to my wife Rajalakshmi and son Shreyas for their ideas and help in proof reading.

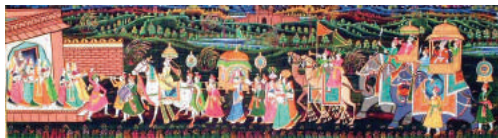
Best Wishes,

R. Ganapathy





## Introduction



It is often said that weddings are made in heaven but performed on this earth. Marriages are indeed a special occasion where the families get together to celebrate the union of two bodies, minds and souls. But just like any other wedding, a Hindu wedding is also full of small rituals and practices - creative actions that express a sentiment or idea – like the lighting of lamp to dispel darkness at twilight or folding of hands into a “Namaste” to greet an elder.

In the beginning, marriage ceremonies were simple. A woman was given to a man by her parents by which they became wife and husband. But as marriage was a very important occasion in the community, many rites, practices and customs that were regulated by the community itself, came to be a part of it. Gradually marriages became complex. And many festive celebrations, mirths and amusements in the form of music, dance and feasting came to be associated with it. Most of the Hindu marriage ceremonies are symbolic. Some are designed to avert possible dangers and ward off evil influences. Other features of the marriage are essentially religious in their origin. The beneficial

Gods are invoked for boons and blessings and specific appeals are sent to unseen powers. Even though many of the rituals are symbolic, they represent the demonstration of beautiful and noble sentiments connected with the marriage.

The South Indian (which includes Tamil/Kerala Iyers) marriage rituals are vast and expansive. However, all of them have special significance and importance. These rituals are mainly categorized into Vedic rituals (those ordained in the Vedas and Shastras), Puranic rituals (that are not mentioned in the Vedas but examples of them being performed can be seen in other holy texts) and social rituals (that are neither mentioned in the Vedas or the Puranas but have come to be part of a Hindu wedding in the last few centuries). The social rituals add a bit of fun and frolic to the traditional rituals in an Iyer wedding.

Unfortunately today many people perform them without any awareness of the rich meaning behind them. A modest attempt has, therefore, been made to briefly describe the meaning and significance of the rituals of a Hindu wedding. The focus is mainly on a Kerala Iyer (Brahmin) wedding as rituals and their forms could vary for Hindu weddings that are performed amongst other regions and other castes.

For many, this information may be superfluous but it is hoped that the younger generation, especially those yet to be married, may find this useful.





Before dwelling into the details of the rituals and various ceremonies associated with a Hindu marriage, especially Kerala Iyer wedding, it would be worthwhile to understand some important aspects of Hinduism and the role that marriage plays in the scheme of things.

## *Hinduism*

“*Sanatana Dharma*” is what Hinduism is all about. The term signifies “The Eternal Faith” with no beginning or end. The founders of Hinduism believed that ever since the dawn of human civilization, when human beings started to ponder over the question “Who am I? How and where have we come from? Where do we go? What is the meaning and purpose of our life on earth and beyond? How was the universe created and how is it regulated?”, *Sanatana Dharma* began. It is believed to be the oldest monotheistic religion in the world.

“*Dharma*” is the key word and it is *Dharma* which sustains the world and is the guiding principle of life. It refers to the performance of righteous spiritual, religious, social, professional and environmental duties with dedication, selflessness and without expectations of results. The religion recognizes six main obstacles for performing dharma. They are *Kama* (desire), *Krodha* (anger), *Lobha* (greed), *Moha* (infatuation), *Madha* (vanity and ego) and *Mat-saraya* (envy).

Hinduism has divided one’s life

into four *Ashramas* or stages of life, after childhood. For each stage, there are specific duties and goals. These are:

1. *Bramhacharya* or celibacy; 6 to 18 years of studentship
2. *Grihasta* or married and family life; professional and social duties
3. *Vanaparastha*. Seclusion to forests for spiritual elevation
4. *Sanyasa*. Life detached from world.

Hinduism also enjoins an individual to perform 52 *samskaras* or purificatory rites starting from one’s marriage, through conception, birth, education of child, to death. These *samskaras* are meant to help to discharge one’s duties to the *Devas* (Gods), *Pitrs* (ancestors) and *Rishis* (sages). However, with the passage of time only about 15 of these are followed today and that too not by all.

*Bramhacharya* is the stage when one steps into student life at 6 years of age and completes his education around 18 years of age i.e. after 12 years which is the time taken to master one Veda following the olden ways of teachings. The student having completed the Vedic studies and *Vratas* (vows or promises), presents his preceptor with a gift and obtains permission to take the formal oath, which marks the close of his student career. He returns and performs the *Samvartana* or returning ceremony to enable him to enter the next stage in life through marriage.

*Vivaha* is the *Ashram* into which one enters after *Brahmacharya*. Till *Vivaha*, one has the liberty to lead one’s life according to one’s likes, but after *Vivaha*, when one is yoked to another life, it has





to be a life of sharing and caring. In that process, one's rough edges get rounded off and one becomes fit to eventually enter the *Sanyasashrama*. Just as nothing can survive without air, no other *Ashrama* can survive without *Grihasthashrama*. It is therefore the pillar of society and provides the best opportunity to serve others by which alone one attains mental purity. *Vivaha* means "to support, to sustain". It involves the support of *Dharma*, for running a home and taking in all good qualities and character including tolerance, self-sacrifice and an altruistic attitude. *Vivaha* rounds off the development of character, which started developing even in the embryo.

The purpose of *Vivaha* is four-fold: *Dharma* (Religion), *Artha* (Money), *Kama* (Carnal desire) and *Moksha* (Salvation). Out of these four, *Kama* and *Artha* though necessary, are of less importance. Though *Kama* is common to both man and animal, what distinguishes the former from the latter is that this instinct is elevated to a higher plane by the former through the *Samskara* of marriage. Both man and woman need a sense of security (*Artha*). This is provided by the institution of marriage. Man and wife share not only their joys but also their sorrows and sufferings, one acting as a cushion for the other. Property is protected through children borne out of the wedlock. The purpose of *Artha* is thus well served by the institution of marriage.

The most important purpose of *Vivaha* or marriage, however, upholding the *Dharma* and discharging one's duties to *Devas*,

*Pitrs* and *Rishis*. In Hindu tradition, therefore, marriage is not just a contract between two individuals. It is a union of two souls for their own betterment, the betterment of their progeny, of their relations and of society at large. Some of the most important rituals are outlined below.

## Vratham and Kaappu Kattal

This is a Vedic ritual. On the day of the marriage, the first prayer is offered to *Lord Ganesha* for the removal of all obstacles that could hinder the performance of this auspicious function. Then a prayer to the *Navagrahas* or Nine Planets, who are believed to rule over man's destinies is offered. This is followed by the *Vratham* performed by the bride and the groom separately.

*Vratham* literally means offering of prayers while fasting. The wedding





celebrations start off with prayers offered to Gods and ancestors to seek their blessings. This ritual is performed by the bride's side and the groom's side simultaneously in the early morning hours of the wedding day.

*Vratham* signifies the beginning of the transformation of the groom from the life of a *brahmacharin* to the life of a *Grihastha*.

At this juncture, the groom also performs certain rites of a *Brahmacharya* so as to complete that phase of his life and move into the life of a *Grihastha*. Also a sacred thread (called *Kaappu*) is tied to the bride's and the groom's wrist to protect them from any evil spirits that might hinder the marriage ceremonies.

*Vratham* is normally the first ritual performed on the day of the marriage. But due to many practical constraints, it could be performed the day before the marriage as well.

## Januvasam

*Januvasam* is held on the eve of the marriage in an Iyer wedding. A social ritual, it consists

of the bridegroom, dressed in western attire, proceeding to the marriage venue from a nearby temple, in a grand procession along with his relatives and friends accompanied by the melodious music of *Nadaswaram* (a wind instrument). In the olden days, this event was meant to showcase the prospective groom to all people in the village.

The Sanskrit word '*Januvasam*' means wearing a cloth up to the knee.

According to the Vedas, after the *Upanayanam* (initiation into *Brahmacharya*) ceremony, a boy dedicates all his time to the learning of Vedas and other knowledge. During the course of his education, it was the custom for him to wear a short white cloth reaching up to his knees, never shave or have a haircut, never wear garlands or use perfumes and sort of lead a life of a saint. This was done so that the boy would not get distracted and could concentrate on his education.

So it was easy, in a procession, to identify the groom, in the company of elderly married people as he would be the only one wearing a cloth (*vasam*) up to the knee (*janu*).

With changed times, the groom now





wears western clothes like a suit, tie, shoes etc. and the procession is taken out in a decorated car preceded by playing of *Nadaswaram* and/or band and some times even bursting of crackers.

The procession then makes its way back to the *Mandapam* (marriage venue) where the engagement ceremony (*Nischayathartham*) takes place after the the groom and his relatives are formally received.

## Maapillai Azhaippu

This function of receiving the groom is performed after the *Januvasam* and is also a social ritual. The bride's parents receive the groom and his family with coconuts amidst playing of *Nadaswaram* and lead them to the place where stay has been arranged.

Nowadays the groom's party is received in front of the *Mandapam* by the bride's parents and relatives. They are presented with betel leaves, betel nuts, coconuts,



flowers along with two conical structures called "*Paruppu Thengai Kutti*" made of

dhal, jaggery and coconut.

The auspicious *Nadaswaram* music, is played off and on during all the ceremonies associated with the marriage.

Occasionally, the priest signals for '*Getti melam*', and the instrument and accompanying drums are played at a faster pace, drowning all other noise in its pitch. This is to prevent bad words or ill omen from being heard at the marriage hall during such crucial and important occasions.

## Nischayathartham

During the *Nichayathartham* (Engagement), the groom and his relatives is offered sandal paste, sugar etc as a gesture of welcome. The groom's party reciprocates this gesture. The priests read out the formal marriage invitation tracing the lineage of the bride and the groom for three generations, the village they belong to, their *Gothra* (lineage), the auspicious *Muhurtham* date and time, the astral positions, etc.

People are asked if they have any objections or concerns with the marriage and only then the *Thamboolam* plate containing Betel leaves, betel nuts, coconut, fruits, flowers, sandal paste, vermilion etc. are exchanged.

It is customary for the groom's parents to present the bride-to-be with a silk sari for wearing on this occasion. At the end of the function the parents and elders bless the groom and the bride for a happy future.







and bilva leaves) by *Sumangalis* (married but not widowed women) who are relatives of the groom and the bride. They first sow the germinated seeds and pour milk with water over it. Five *Sumangalis* on both the bride's and groom's side sow

There is also a custom of presenting certain articles of make up as well as two dolls by the groom's party to the bride during this occasion. It is called for "*Vilayadal*" or playing. This custom seems to be a remnant of the past when the girls were married off at a very young age. So the toys and make up items were gifts meant for the child. This custom seems have lingered even though the status of the bride has now changed from a child to a woman!!! The *Nischayatharatham* is a social ritual.



the germinated grains and pray for long happy married life for the couple as well as begetting several children to brighten their homes.

After the marriage the sprouted grains are released in a river or a pool. The ritual invokes the blessings of *Ashtadik Palakas* (the guardian angels quartered in eight directions) for the healthy life of the couple and birth of progenies. This ritual is called *Ankurarpanam*.

## Paaligai

*Pali* means row of trees and this ritual, in the olden days, could have involved planting of trees by the groom's and bride's families for the upkeep and happiness of the groom and the bride. This is a Puranic ritual.

In modern days, this consists of sowing germinated seeds of nine kinds of pre-soaked cereals in 5 mud pots (layered with green grass

## Kasi Yathrai

In the olden days the groom would lead an almost ascetic life during his





*Brahmacharya* days which meant that he would not have had a shave or a haircut for a number of years. So in those days, after the *Vratham*, the groom used to have a haircut and a bath.

Nowadays, after the *Vratham* the groom wears, for the first time in his life, a dhoti called *Soman* in the *Pancha Kacham* style. The *Pancha Kacham* is typically a dhoti of eight to ten yards worn in a specific way. He also wears an *Uttariyam* (a 5 yards cloth to cover his torso).

He then 'makes his way' (symbolically) to Kasi (Varanasi) with an umbrella, a bamboo fan, a *grantham* (any religious book), new slippers and also a small bundle. The symbolism here is that immediately after his student life, the young bachelor has two alternatives before him – to get married (*Grihastha*) or to become a saint (*Sanyasa*). Being by nature an escapist and having lived the life of a semi-ascetic for a long time, he prefers the ascetic life to the tribulations of a married life and hence sets out to Kasi. On his way, the bride's father intervenes and advises him of the superiority

of married life as compared to the life of an saint. He offers him a coconut and also his daughter in marriage to him and requests him to come back and become a *Grihastha*. The groom accepts this request.

This is a social ritual. The negotiation between the groom and the bride's father indicates that the marriages of those days were arranged by the groom with the bride's parents. This practice seems to have, in course of time, led to the practice of the marriage being first agreed between the parents of the groom and the bride and then further



on to the present times when marriages are, in many cases, agreed first between the groom and the bride and the involvement of the parents comes much later, if at all!!!



## Malai Mattral

*Maalai Maatral* (exchanging garlands) is a ritual which follows immediately after the groom abandons his trip to Kasi, having been lured with the marriage proposal. The bride's father escorts the groom to the entrance of the *Mandapam* where he is received by the bride. The maternal uncles on either side carry both the bride and the groom on their shoulders and the bride and groom



exchange garlands three times. This symbolizes their unification – as one soul in two bodies.

As per *Shastras* a garland worn by a person, should not be used or worn by another. This ritual is the only exception to this rule and the exchange of garland is permitted only between the husband and wife.

This Puranic ritual invokes lot of mirth and fun. The women relatives sing various songs in the background.

## Oonjal and Pachai Podi

During this social ritual, the groom and the bride sit on the swing, facing east. Then the mother of the bride, mother of the groom, paternal aunts of the bride and the groom and one of the uncles wife's or maternal aunts (altogether five or seven people) one by one sprinkle milk on the feet of the groom and bride (symbolizing



washing their feet with milk) and wipe their feet with the edges of their silk sari (There is a belief that the bride's feet should not touch the ground and only the groom's feet should touch the ground while sitting in the swing, symbolizing that he controls the family)

Then, the same relatives wave coloured rice balls (*Pachai Podi*) around the groom and bride in a circular motion and throw them in different directions. This ritual accompanied by classical singing is performed to ward off "evil eyes".

Then the same relatives give a mixture





of sugar, milk and banana to the bride and groom. On completion of this ritual, the bride's paternal aunt walks round the swing with a lamp kept on a plate and lit on cooked rice. She is followed by the bride's mother, grooms mother, grooms paternal aunt, brides or grooms uncle's wife alternatively carrying a pot of water and a lit lamp normally kept in a vessel. This ritual is performed amidst singing of folk songs by women relatives. Most of them remind of the puranic marriages of either *Vishnu* or *Shiva*.

At the end of this ritual the groom and bride wash their feet and the presiding priest waves a coconut round the bride and groom and smashes it on the ground so as to break into pieces. This is again symbolic way to ward off evil eyes that might have been cast on the groom and the bride.

## Vara Pooja

The Vedic ceremony of marriage *Muhurtham* (auspicious hour of the marriage) only starts at this juncture. After



the *Oonjal* , the bride and the groom are

taken to the *Mandapam*. First the bride's father welcomes the groom and washes his feet with water. The groom is considered as the God *Maha Vishnu* himself and bride as his consort Goddess *Lakshmi*. The groom then starts the marriage rituals. He first prays to the Brahmins to permit him to start the Vedic rituals. The Brahmins permit him to do so. He then performs the Ganesh pooja and prays to God to help him complete the rituals without any hindrance.

## Pravaram

The word *Pravaram* literally means renowned, the best, the greatest, etc. A Vedic ritual, this is really an announcement to people gathered for the marriage about ancestral lineage of three generations of the bride and the groom. This is repeated thrice.

The priest on the bride's side asks the bride's father whether he agrees to protect the *dharma* of his family. He agrees. Similarly the groom also agrees for the marriage ceremonies.

The ceremonies relating to the most important stage of the marriage i.e the *Muhurtham* then follows leading to the gifting away of the bride by her father to the groom.



## Kanyadhanam

The Hindus consider gifting of their

bride places her palms holding the coconut on to her father's palms. The groom then joins his palms and gets ready to receive the bride's palm holding coconut from her father. While her palms are be-



daughter to a suitable groom as a very holy deed. In fact it is supposed to be superior to many other holy deeds like giving alms, giving food etc. In the beginning of this Vedic ritual the bride would be sitting on her father's lap, facing east, on a bundle made of paddy stalks and holding a coconut in her hand. She also holds a small gold coin called *Pudu panam*. Her mother stands the right side. The groom stands facing the west. The father of the bride holds the *Thamboola* (Betel leaf and areca nut etc.) in his palms and the

ing transferred thus, the bride's mother pours water over her daughter's hand, which is made to fall on the ground. In Tamil, this is referred to as "*Dhaarai Vaarthu Kuduththal*".

Gently the bride's palms are transferred to the groom's hand. This ritual symbolizes the transfer of ownership of the bride to the groom (At this point, the bride and the groom are still not married. The ritual of the marriage will be performed later by the groom. However, Hindus believe the daughter is owned by her father until the time of her marriage and then owned by



her husband.)

While giving away the ownership of the bride, her father says: “I make this gift of *kanyadhanam* for obtaining absolute happiness, for purifying my twelve preceding and twelve succeeding generations through the progeny born in this girl and for the propitiation of *Lakshmi, Narayana*. I give away this girl adorned with ornaments to you, *Vishnu*, with the desire of conquering the world of *Brahma* -the nourisher of the Universe. All creatures and Gods are witnesses to this fact that I make gift of this girl for the salvation of my forefathers”.

He then asks the groom to promise that during the course of his lifetime, in his search for piety, wealth and desire, she shall not be ignored and transgressed. To which the groom replies, “Transgress her, I will not”. The promise is asked and repeated thrice.

## Madhuparkam and Vara Eeksham

Once the bride’s father gives away his daughter to the groom and he accepts her, the bride’s father again honours the groom by washing his feet and then offers him a mixture of honey and curd called *Madhuparkam*.

The bride’s father then tells the groom: “You who are the personification of *Maha Vishnu*. Please take your seat and accept all these good things that I give you.” The groom is very well aware that he does not deserve the *Madhuparka Pooja* from the girl’s father, who is senior to



him in many ways. Therefore, in order to reciprocate the great honour done to him, the groom chants prayers that he may become a husband worthy of the girl in every way and thus repay the debt he owes to her father. The groom then drinks the *madhuparkam* and chants certain mantras the essence of which is, “Oh sacred *madhuparkam*, you are equivalent to *Amrit* (nectar). Let the energy from the *madhu* make me energetic and also offer me sanctified food.”

After the *Madhuparka Pooja*, the *Vara Eeksham Pooja* (also a Vedic ritual) is performed by the groom. In this ceremony, the groom prays that the bride may bring auspiciousness to the family, do noble deeds and beget worthy children who will bring glory to the family. He addresses the girl and tells her to adjust herself to the people in his family and help discharge the three-fold debt to *Devas, Pitrs* and *Rishis*. He also performs a symbolic act by wiping the bride’s eyebrows with a *Darbha* (dried grass) to remove inauspiciousness.



## Nutana Vastra Dharanam

The bride wears a new 9 yards sari called '*koorai podavai*' exclusively kept for this occasion. The sister of the groom



helps the bride to drape this sari in a particular fashion. Only married women are allowed to wear the sari in this manner. Prayers are then offered to the Gods *Soma*, *Gandharva* and *Agni*. The Puranic concept underlying is metaphorical in a sense that during the bride's childhood, *Soma* gives

her the coolness of the moon. In her adolescence, the *Gandharvas* give her playfulness and beauty. And when she becomes a woman, *Agni* gives

her the passion for life.

The bride ties a string fastened to a piece of turmeric around the wrist of the bridegroom to bind themselves by a religious vow. It is only after tying this string (*kankanam*) that the groom gets the right to touch the bride. A little later, the groom ties a *kankanam* on the bride's wrist.

## Snavana Karmam

A ring made of *Darbha* is placed on the girl's head and a stick representing a yoke is placed on it. A piece of gold is placed on the aperture of the yoke and water is poured through it to the accom-



paniment of mantras. This symbolizes two things: just as two bullocks yoked together have to move in step to make a cart run smoothly, in the same manner,





it is necessary for man and wife to pull together to make the family life healthy, happy and prosperous. Sprinkling of water through the aperture is a symbolic act to rid the bride of all sins and purify her to make her fit to assist her husband in the performance of rituals. This is a Puranic ritual

## Mangalya Dharanam

*Mangalya* means auspicious and *Dharanam* means wearing. The bride has to wear two *mangalyas* (also known as *Thalis* in Tamil) one given by her parents and the other by the groom's parents.

ing their blessing and good wishes. This *mangalya* is a piece of gold embossed with either a *Shiva Linga*, *Tulasi Maadam* (Tulasi plant) or the figure of Goddess *Meenakshi*.

The groom ties the *Mangalyas*, strung in a yellow thread, around the neck of the bride. Three knots are tied. The groom ties the first knot and the other two knots are tied by his sister. The groom recites the following prayer while tying the *Mangalya*: "This string is holy and giver of good things in life. It also is going to elevate my life. Hey, beautiful maiden, I am tying this around your neck and pray that you would live for hundred years."



The shape and design of *Mangalya* varies from family to family. Before being tied it is circulated among the audience seek-

ing their blessing and good wishes. There is no mention of this ritual in the Vedas. *Mangalya Dharanam* is a Puranic ritual and the prayer







which is in modern Sanskrit is not taken from the Vedas. It is, therefore, quite possible that this custom originated years later. But as of today, this is one of the most important of the marriage functions. During the *Mangalya Dharanam*, the elders shower flowers and yellow coloured rice on the groom and bride. To celebrate this successful completion of this ritual guests are offered some fruit juices or cold drinks.

This ritual however, does not signify the completion of the marriage ceremony. Since the groom and bride have to maintain the highest order of purity and hygiene till the marriage ceremonies are completed, they should not be touched by the guests and even congratulating the bride and the groom by shaking hands is strictly advised against by the priests and elders.



## *Mounjee Dharanam*

A string made of *Dharbha* grass



is tied around the hips of the bride by the groom. This Vedic

ritual is called “*Mounjee Dharanam*” While doing so, the groom prays: “Oh Fire God, please give a stable and composed mind to this maid, who is going to join me in worshipping you. Let her not get perturbed by anything from now onwards; let her beget lot of children, wealth, grains and house. Let her also get a lustrous pretty body. For getting all these I am tying her with this string made of *dharbha*.”

This is a symbolic knot to make the bride fit for performing the Vedic rituals with undivided attention. This is meant to restrict both her physical movements and thoughts during the performance of the rituals.



## *Agni Prathistha*

This means lighting of fire. Fire has been the basis of modern life. For centuries the only method of raising the fire was by churning wood. Due to it being extremely essential in day to day life, a married man was supposed to maintain fire perennially in his house with the help of his wife. During this holy Vedic ritual a new fire is supposed to be lit by the groom with the help of the priest. He is supposed to take a part of this fire and maintain it in his home for life.



## *Pani Grahanam*

The act of *Pani Grahanam* (holding of hands) points to the new bond between the groom and the bride. During this Ve-





dic ritual, the groom holds the right hand of the bride. Once again prayers are offered to *Soma* for mental growth, *Gand-*



*harva* for the growth of body and speech and *Agni* for rousing the fire of passion or maturity, *Saraswati* for welfare and *Vayu* for harmony so that there are no serious disagreements between the bride and the groom in their married life.

As indicating the union of hearts, the groom touches the heart of the bride, saying: "I take your heart into mine; your mind shall live in mine; you shall rejoice with your heart in my word; may God join you to me." This ceremony is symbolic of taking charge and responsibility of the bride.

## Sapthapadhi

*Sapthapadhi* literally means seven steps. This is the most important Vedic ritual in a marriage and this ritual seals the relationship as husband and wife. The Indian legal system also recognizes the perfor-

mance of *Sapthapadhi* as the conclusive evidence of a marital relationship. This ritual consists of the groom holding the right foot of the bride with his left hand and



making her take seven steps either in the direction of east or north. The following prayers are recited by the groom. The prayer in Sanskrit and its meaning are given here.

The following requests are to be recited by the groom to the bride after she takes the seven steps: "You, who has taken the seven steps with me, has become my friend. We who have taken the seven steps together would live as friends. I should get your friendship. I will not part from your friendship. You should also not part with my friendship for ever."

"Our thoughts, decisions, deeds should be always be in unison. We should have mutual affection,





First Step	<i>Ekamishē Vishnus twanvedhu</i>	Let God MahaVishnu who is spread through out the world, bestow on your everything necessary for the life you are going to undertake with me and our progenies.
Second Step	<i>Dwey Oorjhe</i>	Let HIM bestow on your sufficient health and strength for discharging your obligations to the family
Third Step	<i>Trini Vvathaya</i>	Let HIM be with you and protect you when we together perform all vedic and social obligations
Fourth Step	<i>Chatvari Ma Yo Bhavaya</i>	Let HIM bless you for enjoying all pleasures and happiness in life
Fifth Step	<i>Pancha Pashubya</i>	Let HIM bless you for your wealth to prosper (In those days, wealth was measured in terms of ownership of cattle – <i>Pashu</i> in Sanskrit)
Sixth Step	<i>Shat Ruthubya</i>	Let HIM bestow for the joys of all seasons
Seventh Step	<i>Sapta Saptabhyo Hotraabhyo vishnus twanvedhu</i>	Let HIM bestow everything for our ever-lasting friendship.

in wearing her toe rings. In Ramayana when *Rama* asks *Lakshmana* to identify the ornaments of *Seetha*, he identifies only the *Noopura* which is worn in the ankles. He tells *Rama* that the only part of *Seetha* he has seen is her feet. Though *Noopura* means

love and empathy. We should always seek the best for the other. There should be no secret between us. Let us together enjoy food, our wealth and belongings, our welfare, serenity, peaceful mind, all the physical and mental pleasures and all other good things in life. Let us together observe and discharge the entire obligation ordained by our religion”  
After the completion of this ritual, the bride, having become the wife of the groom, takes on his *Gothra* family lineage.



anklets, some define it as toe rings and claim that this was an ancient ritual. Possibly this was worn to identify a married woman in ancient times.

## Metti



## Pradhaana Homam



This is yet another Puranic ritual which has no Vedic mantras. The sister of the groom helps the bride

Having now become husband and wife, what follows are some rituals which reinforce the marriage vows. A few of





them are symbolic and meant to reemphasize and demonstrate the vows. The couple starts performing the Vedic rituals together.

Of the five elements of nature, Fire (*Agni*) is the only one which can be perceived by our eyes. So fire is considered as the conduit for all offerings made to God and worshipped. It is believed that offering of pure ghee to the Gods helps them to appreciate the purity of our intentions.

As stated earlier, a girl is believed to be protected by *Soma*, *Gandharvas* and *Agni* till she reaches puberty. So the *Pradhhaana Homam* is performed as a gesture of thanks giving to these deities. There are 16 prayers which are sought from the Gods during this ritual.

*Pradhhaana Homam* is a crucial part of the wedding. The couple circles around the fire and feed it with ghee and twigs of nine types of tress as sacrificial fuel. The fumes that arise possess medicinal properties inhaling which the body is cleansed. *Agni*, the sacred purifier, is deemed as a witness to the marriage (*Agni Sakshi*).

## Asmarohanam

Treading on a grinding stone is the next step. In this Vedic ritual, the husband holds the big toe of the right leg of the wife with his left hand and places it on a stone. This is meant to symbolically communicate to the wife that she should be as firm and as strong as the stone in her



devotion, fidelity and all her resolves in the married life.

## Arundhati and Dhruva Nakshatrams

Next, the husband leads the wife to show her the star *Arundhati* (of the *Sapta Rishi* – Great Bear Constellation) and *Dhruva*, the pole star. This Puranic ritual is to be performed on the wedding night, but nowadays, this is done during the day itself as all the wedding ceremonies are compressed to be completed in the forenoon, due





to expediency.

The star *Arundhati*, wife of *Sage Vashishtha* is exemplified as an ideal wife, the embodiment of chastity. The husband points out this star to the bride as a source of inspiration to lead a virtuous life. He then points out to the pole star *Dhruva*, who attained immortality through single-minded devotion and perseverance as an example to be followed to keep the bonds of marriage strong.

## Lajja Homam

*Lajja Homam* is a Vedic ritual in which the brother of the wife gives her a handful of puffed rice grains. She hands it over to



her husband who, on her behalf, feeds it into the fire. Through this food offering, the wife seeks a long life for her husband and continuation of the family tree. The wife's family members also participate in this rite symbolizing the continuance of links between the two families.

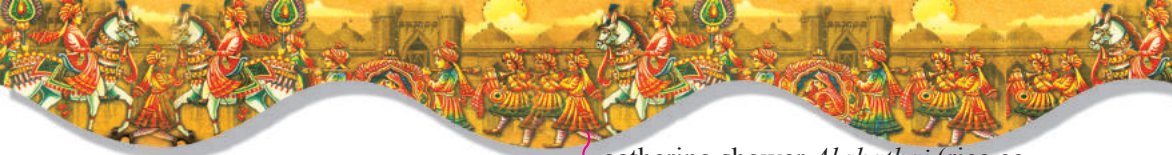
## Jayaathi, Pravesa & Sesha Homams

Three *Homams* (Vedic ritual offerings to *Agni*) are required to be performed on the night of the wedding. However, here again, convenience and expediency has overtaken the Vedic prescriptions. So they are performed during the day itself in these days.

*Jayaathi Homam* is to propitiate the *Gandharvas*, the soft-natured celestial beings, generally associated with the finer sentiments of life. This *homam* is performed at the end of the main *homam* for successful completion of the function and for a prosperous living. It is not a specific marriage ritual but is performed as a prayer on similar occasions.

As per the Puranas, these prayers and fire sacrifice was offered by *Indra* when he went to war with *Asuras* as taught by his teacher *Brihaspathi*. It consists of 13 prayers. This is followed by 18 prayers with offerings in the fire to *devas* and ancestors which are meant to increase knowledge and the *brahminical sathvic* qualities. This is followed by 12 prayers, which are for the benefit of the country we live. Another three prayers called *Vyahrithi homam*, *Swishtakrith homam* and *Prajapathi homam* follow these. After a total of 48 offerings to the fire, the fire from the *homam* is preserved in a new mud pot and is taken by the wife to the *Pravesya homam* which takes place in the husband's home. She is also supposed to keep and guard this fire carefully all





her life.

After the *Jayaathi Homam*, the groom unties the string of *darbha* from the bride's hip chanting certain mantras. This act is called *Mounjee Vimochanam*, signifying thereby that the bride is now released from the restrictions placed on her during *Mounjee Dharanam* so that couple could enjoy the good things of *Grahashthashram*, do their karma and attain *Brahmaloka*.

The next ritual is *Pravesa homam* to solemnize the bride's entry into the husband's home.

*Sesha Homam* is the last of the *homams*. In this residual ghee is poured on the bride's head four times. This is intended to draw strength from the Vedas for a harmonious, happy and prosperous life. The word "*Sesha*" means what is left-over – the left-over ghee in this case. According to sastras, after *Pravesa homam*, the groom is expected to observe the discipline of *Brahmacharya* for three days. Only on the fourth day, *Sesha homam*, the last of the *homams* is to be performed. However, all the ceremonies are now compressed into one day and that too the morning part of the day.

## Aseervadam & Phala Dhanam

*Aseervadam* means blessing. The husband spreads his *Uttariyam* over his shoulders and his wife stands by his side. Then the elders and learned people in the

gathering shower *Akshathai* (rice coloured by turmeric) at the couple accompanied by chanting of blessings and vedic prayers to the almighty to give them the very best in life. Once this ritual is completed the husband and wife are ready to accept gifts from all their relatives and friends.

The first to give the gifts are always the



bride's parents usually consisting of dresses for the newly weds and jewelry for the wife. Gifts from the paternal and uncles of the bride and the groom then follows. Then the other relations and friends give their gifts. Each gift is given accompanied by chanting of *mantras* by priests in the form of blessing. This is a Puranic ritual. After this *Aarathi* is performed.

*Phala Dhanam* or giving of cash gifts to all the guests used to take place after the *Aseervadam*. This practice has been discontinued and such gifts are given only to select relatives and guests, these days. However, the practice of giving return gifts to all the guests is slowly gaining ground.





## Managala Aarathi

The marriage function concludes with *Managala Aarathi* which is a solution of



lime and turmeric powder that is prepared on a plate and circled around in front of the couple and poured to the ground. This is a Puranic ritual meant to drive away all evil spirits.

The *Aarathi* is performed a few times during the wedding ceremony like, after all the ceremonies are concluded, after the *Nelangu* etc.

## Paalum Pazhamum

In this social function, the husband and wife first visit the husband's house and then the wife's house, where they are offered pieces of banana mixed in milk.

## Sadhdhi

The social lunch normally prepared on the marriage day is a very grand one with many



courses. The wife along with her relatives invites the groom and his family for the lunch. The husband and wife sit together. There is a lot of fun and teasing when the newly married couple exchange their half eaten food try to feed each other. As the guests leave they are given *Thamboolam* i.e. a bag containing a coconut, betel leaves, betal nut, turmeric, vermilion, fruit etc as a gesture of auspiciousness and thanks giving.

## Nelangu

The evening of the marriage day is the time to relax and have fun. The newly wed bride invites her husband for playing (again remnant of old times when the



bride and groom were very young). Much to the merriment of all the guests, what follows is simple fun and frolic with the





relatives and friends of both the parties joining in with singing, dancing, cracking jokes etc.

To impart an aura of festive mood, a mock game is arranged in which the wife and her husband are seated facing each other and engage in rolling coconuts like balls and the onlookers play the role of umpires and declare the winner. The wife smears the groom's feet with colour paste, shows him a mirror, combs his hair etc. All these are reciprocated by the husband. The two then smash fired papads over each other's head and the challenge is dodge and avoid being showered by the papad pieces.

These events bring out the qualities of sporting spirit, kindness, co-operative nature in the couple thus surfacing the hidden traits for the other to note. These events also bringing about a better understanding and compatibility.

## Reception

The Reception is social ritual where the bride and the groom interact with their family and friends. There is a tendency nowadays of holding the Wedding Reception after the *Nischayathatham*, though strictly speaking, the bride and groom should be presented as a couple to the general public only after all the rituals relating to the marriage are completed on the following day.

## Shanti Muhurtham

Shanti Muhurtham is a Vedic ritual

performed for the consummation of the marriage after determining an auspicious time on a night after the



marriage. Importance to the date and time is given to ensure a happy, everlasting married life that is full of understanding and affection. Two souls are united in a sacred act of fulfillment, to beget children as nature's best creation.

Though the *shastras* ordain that the *Shanti* should be done on a later day after the marriage, these days the ritual is performed on the same day of the marriage for the sake of convenience.

Marriage is not meant as a means to satisfy carnal craving. It is regarded as a means to spiritual glory, a 'sin qua non' for the development of lineage – a necessary link between the "dead past" and an "unborn future" that must come alive to be undertaken as a part of spiritual duty with devotion to perpetuate the family tradition.





*Santosh  
&  
Shruti*





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